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ABSTRACT

There are many different approaches to the concept of "quality," which focus on both "what" defines the quality of a service and "who" defines quality. A study funded by the British Library (England) sought to define an approach to quality appropriate for the delivery and effective management of public library services. The study was concerned with quality management as a specific system or technique for securing a high quality library service and focused on organizational, client, and policy issues. A questionnaire sent to all public library authorities in the United Kingdom yielded an 81% response rate. Of the authorities surveyed, 62% do not have a quality program, 19% have a quality program, and 19% are developing a quality program. The three most important quality features identified were: skilled, courteous employees (62%); an appropriate range and quality of resources (57%); and a welcoming environment (32%). Areas felt to be in need of greatest improvement included: employee knowledge to answer client questions or make referrals; convenient opening hours; clear guides for clients to navigate the library; a good book stock; and making clients aware of the standards of service they can expect. Service quality can be judged by the users, professional librarians, and other stakeholders, including local politicians and library suppliers. (Contains 28 references.) (SWC)

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Quality Management and Public Library Services

by Bob Usherwood

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Quality Management and Public Library Services

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In one sense the experienced public library manager is entitled to wonder what all the fuss is about. The idea that success, either in business or service depends on the 'quality' of the product or output is not new. Anyone who has checked either their own work, or someone else's for mistakes, has been a 'quality manager'.

What is Quality?

That having been said, 'Quality' has become the new 'buzz-word' in the literature and practice of management. It is a concept that is now debated in both the public and the private sectors and supported by the main political parties. In Britain the Conservatives' Citizen's Charter (1991) emphasises the importance of quality in local authority services while the Labour Party seeks 'to ensure that quality is the hallmark of all local services' (Labour Party, 1991). However, despite the wide use of the term, 'there is no consensus about the meaning of quality' (Pfeffer and Coote, 1991) and academics and practitioners alike are attempting to answer the question 'what is meant by "quality"?' (Sanderson, 1992)

There are some definitions with which readers will be familiar. For example British Standard BS 4778 (1987) defines quality as 'the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs.' Juran (1979) defines it more simply as: 'fitness for purpose or use'. Stewart and Walsh (1989), who write specifically about public services, define a quality service as one that: 'does what it is intended to do and is responsive to the needs of the user.'

Although these definitions seem relatively clear, they are not particularly helpful to the service manager. First, they beg the question: what does 'quality' mean in the context of a particular product or service? A manager specifying the requirements for a high quality database, for example, would come up with a list of attributes very different from a manager trying to define a 'quality' counter service in a community library.

Secondly, the definitions approach quality in terms of the end product. Of course, this is perfectly legitimate, since the outcome of any effort to improve quality must be a better product or service, measured by increased user satisfaction with it. However, when the question is asked: 'how might the quality of this service or product best be raised?' differences in approach to quality are revealed. The answers may involve not just adjustments to the end product or service, to improve performance but may also include the application of specific techniques to improve the efficiency of processes within the organisation, a review of organisational relationships, or indeed, a fundamental re-think of how the organisation approaches its business.

Thus the literature and management practice demonstrate many different approaches to the concept of 'quality'. Writers (Foster and Whittle, 1990) have referred to the 'quality management maze' and while phrases such as 'quality centre', 'quality assurance', 'total quality management' (TQM) are sometimes used interchangeably, in fact they reflect very different views of the subject. It has been argued, for instance, that public service managers need to be able to differentiate between 'quality that derives from systems [and] quality that derives from people and their commitment.' (Walsh, 1992) Similarly the practical application of BS 5750 / ISO 9000 to services such as public libraries which deal with information, imagination and ideas rather than a physical product has not been fully investigated.

Pfeffer and Coote (1991) have identified a number of different approaches to quality but argue that many fail in terms of public service management 'because they do not acknowledge important distinctions between commerce and welfare.'

The approaches identified by Pfeffer and Coote are:

(i) The traditional approach. This is associated with very high standards of production, delivery and presentation. The kind of quality that goes with the no-expense-spared approach of expensive restaurants, French fragrances, Rolls Royce cars and beautifully bound books.

(ii) The scientific approach. This is seen in those organisations that have focused on performance indicators. It is the approach to quality advocated in *Keys to success* (Office of Arts and Libraries, 1990) and *The Citizen's Charter performance indicators* (Audit Commission, 1992).

(iii) The managerial or excellence approach. This can be found in the work of Peters and Waterman (1982). The aim is customer satisfaction. Quality is achieved by constantly striving to meet customer requirements.

(iv) The consumerist approach. This seeks to put power in the hands of the consumer by giving her or him redress for complaints.

(v) The democratic approach. This has been developed by Pfeffer and Coote as a reaction against some of the approaches given above. It seeks to satisfy the community as a whole and to achieve common goals and, they would argue, it is the most appropriate model for public services.

Pfeffer and Coote's research is significant in that it highlights the difference of approach which may be necessary for public sector organisations as opposed to those in the private sector. The different approaches focus not only on *what* defines the quality of a service, but also, *who* should define that quality. These are important matters and ones that will be considered later.

Issues of Quality for Library and Information Services

As we have seen the literature of quality management in the profession is voluminous, and is growing (Milner et al, 1994). Services that have adopted either TQM or BS 5750, however, are still in the minority. The variety of approaches that the literature reveals, shows that for libraries the quality 'maze' has not yet been solved. Moreover it can be seen that many library authorities are undertaking activities which contribute to a 'quality' service although that term is sometimes not used. Evidence of this can be found in the research carried out by Porter (1992), into quality initiatives in British library and information services, Kinnell and MacDougall's (1993) work on marketing and Levy and Usherwood's (1992) project on interpersonal skills.

The British Library funded research project at Sheffield and Loughborough sought to build on this work and to define an approach to quality appropriate for the delivery of public library services. Our objective was to ascertain the approach, scope, nature and method of 'quality management' practised in selected public library services and to compare this with practice in commercial organisations so as to enhance quality management techniques for public library services.

The need to achieve this has been accelerated by a number of factors. These include:

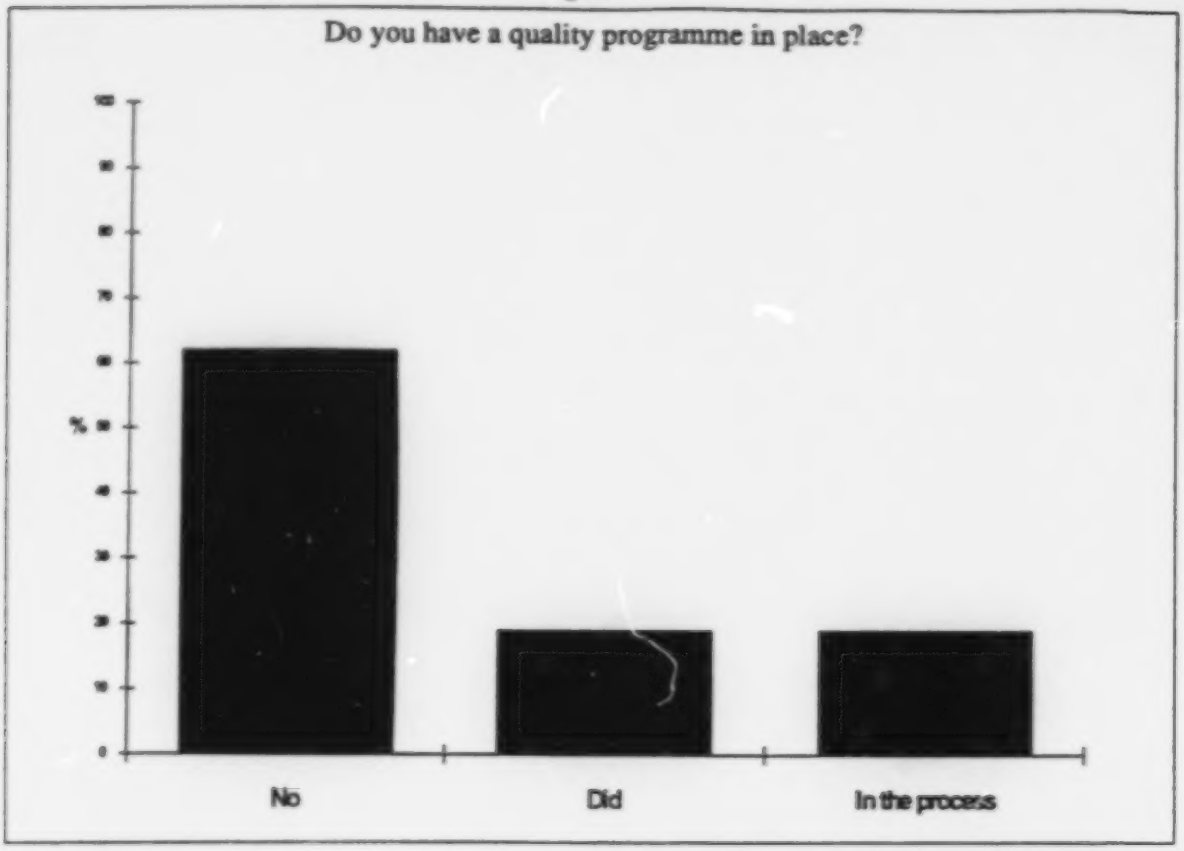
- The expectation from Government that public services will adopt a business ethos
- Financial constraints and the need to make every penny count
- Legislative changes for public services such as Compulsory Competitive Tendering which has led to the development of service specifications

With the new emphasis on contracts in local government, it will become increasingly important to establish definitive approaches to quality as the prelude to the tendering process. There is also the pressure to gain certification to quality standards such as BS 5750 and ISO 9000. In addition there is what Walsh (1992) has called the maturity of public service with a greater emphasis on choice. The emphasis has now moved from *more* housing, *more* education, *more* health care, etc. to *better* housing, *better* education, *better* health care. In addition performance indicators are increasingly being used to enhance the quality of service delivery (Sumsion, 1993). Therefore there is a need to explore concepts of quality and performance so as to further develop the effective management of public library services.

Our research is concerned with quality management as a specific system or technique for securing a high quality library service. As part of our attempt to do this we focused our investigation on three interlinked areas: organisational issues, client issues and policy issues. In so doing we asked the following questions of public library managers.

1. Why has the quality concept been introduced by the library service and how has the concept affected the determination of performance indicators?
2. What approaches to quality have been adopted by the library service? (eg. Never ending improvement: BS 5750: Total Quality Environment: TQM etc.)
3. What quality systems are perceived to be in place? That is systems for collecting, measuring and using information in order to support decision-making.
4. Why were these approaches adopted?
5. What organisational structures have been introduced to enhance the delivery of quality services?
6. What are the attitudes of staff to 'quality management'? Porter (1992) emphasises the importance

Figure 1



of ascertaining the attitudes of middle management and 'front-line' staff.

7. What organisational commitment is evident with regard to staff development for quality management?
8. How does the library organisation 'get close to the customer'?
9. What is the role of elected members in the quality management of the service and how is this developed?
10. How has QM been evaluated and how does it relate to the library's stated objectives/mission statement/charter?
11. What has been the impact of 'quality management' on the delivery of the library service?
12. In the opinion of elected members and officers does 'quality management' work?

Our draft report is currently with the British Library but I am able to share with you some of the results of our survey of public library authorities and discussions with senior managers. We sent a questionnaire to every public library authority in the UK. This had a 81% response rate and the data therefore provide a fairly accurate picture of what is the state of play with regard to quality in the public library sector.

One of the more interesting findings is that, despite the amount of literature about the subject, 62% of authorities say that they do not have a quality programme in place, 19% do claim to have such a programme and the remaining 19% are in process of establishing one (see *Figure 1*). This may suggest that those who argue that more rhetoric than reality is associated with the concept of quality management may have a valid point.

Moreover when we asked if they had any specific quality initiative, 47% of respondents indicated that their service did not have any. Amongst the rest the greatest interest is in Investors for People (26.5%)and the Charter mark (18.5%). There is a 13.5% adoption rate for Customer contracts, 10% for TQM and 10% for Quality Circles. Only 3.5% claimed to have adopted BS 5750/ ISO 900 (see *Figure 2*).

When we asked about the criteria used to measure the quality of the services delivered respondents indicated that they used the following measures:

Figure 2

Adoption Rates for 'Formalised' Quality Initiatives

Involvement with no initiative	47.0%
Investors in People	26.5%
Charter Mark	18.5%
ISO/BS5750	3.5%

- 89% used existing Performance Indicators
- 65% indicated that they used complaints
- 49% measured success against predetermined targets
- 49% used compliments
- 35% took account of Greater Value for money
- 25% used Customer satisfaction surveys

Other measures mentioned included comparisons with other library services, the number of books issued and the perceptions of elected members (see *Figure 3*).

What Defines the Quality of the Service?

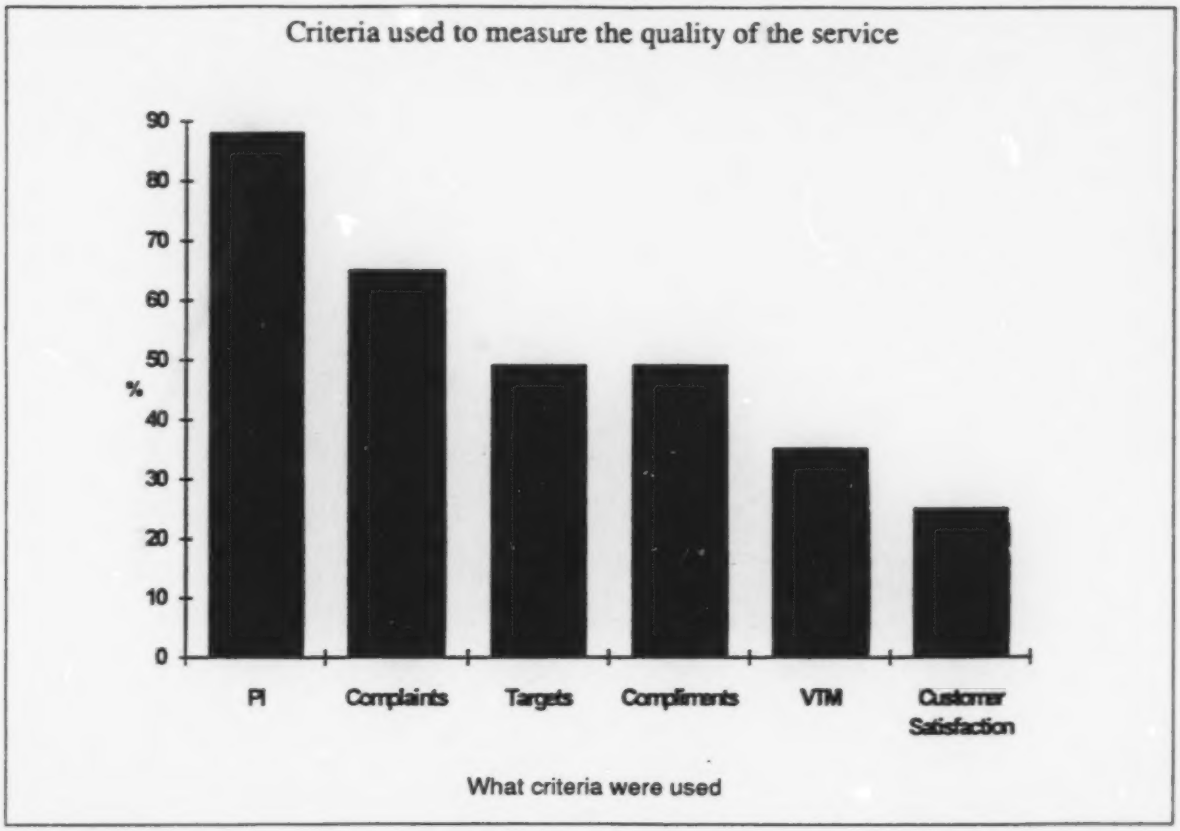
We also asked librarians completing the questionnaire to share with us their views on what they thought were the three most important quality features of a public library service. Although a great many features were cited there was some degree of consensus in the response.

- 62% highlighted the importance of having skilled, courteous employees
- 57% stressed the importance of an appropriate range and quality of resources
- 32% stated that a welcoming environment was important.

We also asked respondents to indicate those areas that they felt needed greatest improvement in their service. Apart from one authority that felt it did not need to improve anything the priorities for improvement were:

1. Employees involved in contact with clients should have the knowledge to answer questions or make appropriate referrals

Figure 3



2. Opening hours to be convenient to the majority of clients
3. Clear guiding to enable clients to find their way around the library
4. A good book stock
5. Libraries to make clients aware of the standards of service they can expect

Differences of Approach

Differences of approach to the issue of quality are reflected in the way the way people respond to the question: what defines the quality of the service? Walsh (1992), as we have seen, argued that public service managers need to be able to differentiate between 'quality that derives from systems [and] quality that derives from people and their commitment.' From a different perspective the Audit Commission (1993) proposes that quality management should focus on four key areas:

Quality of communication. Does the council (in this case the library service) communicate with, and listen to and understand, users?

Quality of specification. Is this understanding converted into clear standards for service delivery?

Quality of Delivery. Are the standards actually delivered, and is remedial action taken when failure occurs?

Quality of people. Are staff motivated, trained, well managed and supported by quality systems ?

In our own we were interested to ascertain what systems are in place and the use that is made of them. For instance, should complainers be treated as a valuable asset? How should a library service deal with complaints? To what level should authority to deal with them be delegated?

Our findings also show that public librarians' concerns reflect many of the fashionable ideas to be found in the management text books. Some of these were discussed with senior practitioners who attended a workshop arranged as an integral part of the research.

Thus 'empowerment' is talked about a great deal but appears to be practised rather less. Our discussions considered how managers can develop a culture that 'empowers'. This raises other questions. For instance: does everybody necessarily want to be empowered? What benefits can be gained and what are the dangers of empowerment?

Several of the drawbacks associated with the implementation of QM highlighted in questionnaire

responses, referred to the need to input even greater time and effort into managing a service. Skills seemed to be lacking in managing meetings, team working and communication with employees. Particularly important was the lack of adequate opportunity for successful and meaningful upward communication. This caused our workshop participants to consider what leadership skills and personal attributes are vital for success? What are the barriers to success and what, if anything distinguishes the leader from the manager?

The question of training was also raised. In particular: what training is necessary for employees working with QM? Do they need to understand the 'tools' of the system? Does everyone need to know and understand these, or only a select few.

Finally there is the issue of customers, clients or members. That is, what do we call the people who use our public library services. In a sense, the answer to that question defines how we serve them. However, I have written about this elsewhere (Usherwood, 1992) so rather than ride that particular hobby horse again let me turn to the all important and related question: who defines service quality?

Who Defines Service Quality?

There are three possibilities:

a) A DEPARTMENT, ORGANISATION, OR AGENCY EXTERNAL TO THE ORGANISATION

Since a library or information unit is likely to be part of a larger organisation, it is common for the quality agenda to be set by someone outside the unit. This may, of course, be the parent organisation to which the library or information service belongs. A commercial company might seek BS 5750 / ISO 9000 accreditation, to secure wider markets. The information unit serving the company would, in that instance, have no choice but to adopt the approach, irrespective of its own specific needs.

For public services, there are also political considerations. In the UK the Audit Commission has established comparative performance indicators for local authorities and the Prime Minister's Office has launched the Citizen's Charter (1991) initiative. The Prime Minister has stressed the need for independent inspection of public services 'to reassure the public and encourage the best performance' (quoted in Bone, 1993). It is therefore a little surprising that the Minister responsible for public libraries saw fit to reject the suggestion for OFLIB made in the DNH Public Library Review (Aslib, 1995).

Tensions can arise when the outside body has priorities which conflict with those of the organisation. The British Government's main emphasis for example, has been on 'value for money'. Although there may be some agreement that this is important, it may not be the most appropriate approach for a service that wishes, for instance, to prioritise services to the most needy in the community.

b) THE 'PROFESSIONALS' WHO WORK FOR AND WITHIN THE ORGANISATION, AND DELIVER THE SERVICE

'Professionals', here, may include anyone whose organisational role is to make decisions about the nature of the service delivered. The professionals' assessment of quality may be based on an approach which includes the development of service standards. These may be produced by a national or international professional association. The Government's Charter Initiative has seen the proliferation of Customer Charters and Contracts in public libraries. The Library Association (1994) issued a *Charter for public libraries* last year and a *Model statement of standards* supporting this was published earlier this year (Library Association, 1995). In addition codes of good practice and policy documents containing local service standards have been produced by individual authorities.

Internally, service specifications may be produced. These have become common in the UK because government legislation requires public bodies to open up certain services to competition from the private sector (compulsory competitive tendering). The London Borough of Brent voluntarily contracted out the running of two of its most successful branch libraries last year (1994) and Westminster is currently advertising for a company to manage its libraries and archives services. Whatever one feels about such developments, a detailed and comprehensive service specification defining the quality of the service to be delivered is an essential prerequisite of contracting out.

c) THE USERS AND CUSTOMERS OF THE SERVICE

Most of the quality gurus stress the importance of taking a customer-focused approach to quality. This is because, in private industry, profits rely upon sales which, in turn, rely upon retaining satisfied customers. The 'excellence' approach advocated by Peters and Waterman (1982) particularly emphasises this aspect of a quality system.

In the non-profit making service sector, the situation is more complex. Although it can be said that the primary purpose of any public body is to meet

the needs of citizens, there is seldom a direct relationship between an expressed need or demand for a service and the organisation's ability to satisfy it. This can lead to tensions if the users of a service have been involved in setting service standards. As Bone (1993) picturesquely puts it, 'You cannot specify the sausage unless you know what the sausage machine can make'.

On the other hand, users' perceptions of quality may be at odds with the standards of the professionals. Taylor (1993) in his regular 'Quality Street' column, in the *New Statesman* makes the point that customers have been found to want a social relationship rather than a perfect service. There may therefore be inconsistencies between customer perceptions of service quality and what they see as important in a service package. Similarly different perceptions have been revealed by the DNH Public Library Review where the data show that most users thought the services had improved over the past few years and most of the professionals thought it had deteriorated.

Stewart and Walsh (1989) have also pointed out that it not always clear who the customer is. In the case of a centrally maintained school library service, for instance, is the 'customer' the child, the school, individual teachers or the Local Education Authority which funds it? The perception of quality held by these diverse groups is likely to vary considerably.

No matter what quality system is adopted, the outcome of the service has to be user satisfaction, however that is defined and assessed. It may not mean always giving him or her what they want. To paraphrase the dramatist, Arnold Wesker, you should not give people what they want because they deserve better than that. Indeed even the leading TQM guru Deming has warned against over reliance on the perceptions of what he calls customers. Also there is the very real danger that in giving people what we think they want we will patronise our users. Earlier this year there were some very interesting pieces on this theme in the British press. In one the sociologist, Richard Hoggart (1995) asked, Why treat us like dimwits? He went on to talk about the 'shifting about with the meaning of quality' saying that it led to: 'nervous and excessive praise for the taste of the people out there'.

A very helpful analysis of what 'dimensions' of quality may be based on user needs and requirements, is contained in Stewart and Walsh's (1989) pamphlet for the Local Government Training Board (LGTB). They write:

'patients in a hospital may be able to judge how they feel after an operation but do not have the knowledge or ability to judge how effectively the surgeon has performed. Only the surgeon or a colleague may have that knowledge.'

Similarly a library user may be satisfied with the stock in her or his library but only a librarian may have the knowledge to judge the breadth, depth and accuracy of the range of material on offer. On the other hand if we consider the experience of the user, for example in terms of his or her across-the-counter encounters, then clearly he or she has the knowledge to be involved in an assessment of the quality of the interaction. Thus rather than expecting every stakeholder to be able to judge the whole service we perhaps need to distinguish between the ability to judge, the quality of the services offered, the quality of the environment in which the service is offered, the quality of the service relationships and so on. In asking who judges quality we should consider, in the public library context:

1. The extent to which the user can assess the service
2. The extent to which professional librarians can assess the service
3. The extent to which other stakeholders can assess the service. In the public library this could include local politicians or library suppliers.

This of course may vary with the different aspects of the service to be evaluated and the different attitudes of those approaching the task. Including perhaps the attitudes of library researchers.

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